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Israel to ban entry of foreigners from all countries over Omicron COVID variant

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Israel has so far confirmed one case of Omicron, with seven suspected cases. (Reuters: Corinna Kern)

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Israel is barring entry to all foreigners, making it the first country to shut its borders completely in response to the new and potentially more contagious Omicron coronavirus variant.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett also said the country would use counter-terrorism phone-tracking technology in order to contain the spread of the COVID-19 variant.

He said the travel ban, pending government approval, would last 14 days.

Officials hope that by then there will be more information on how effective COVID-19 vaccines are against Omicron, which was first detected in South Africa and has been dubbed a 'variant of concern' by the World Health Organization.

'Our working hypotheses are that the variant is already in nearly every country, and that the vaccine is effective, although we don't yet know to what degree,' Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked told a local news program.

Israelis entering the country, including those who are vaccinated, will be required to quarantine, Mr Bennett said.

The ban will come into effect at midnight on Sunday local time.

A travel ban on foreigners coming from most African states was already in place.

Key points:

- Israel has already recorded one case of the Omicron variant
- The country's travel ban will last for an initial 14 days
- The country will use counter-terrorism phone-tracking technology to contain the spread of the Omicron variant

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Shin Bet counter-terrorism agency phone-tracking technology will be used to locate carriers of the new variant in order to curb its transmission to others, Mr Bennett said.

Used on and off since March 2020, the surveillance technology matches virus carriers' locations against other mobile phones nearby to determine who they have come into contact with.

Israel's Supreme Court this year limited the scope of its use after civil rights groups mounted challenges over privacy concerns.

Omicron, which has also been detected in countries including Belgium, Botswana, Hong Kong, Italy, Germany and Britain, has sparked global concern and a wave of travel curbs, although epidemiologists say such restrictions may be too late to stop it from circulating globally.

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The Health Ministry has not said whether the confirmed case was vaccinated.

Three of the seven suspected cases were fully vaccinated, the ministry said, and three had not returned from travel abroad recently.

Around 57 per cent of Israel's 9.4 million population is fully vaccinated, according to the Health Ministry, meaning they have either received a third shot of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine or it has not yet been five months since they received their second dose.

Israel has recorded 1.3 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 8,000 fatalities since the pandemic began.

Reuters



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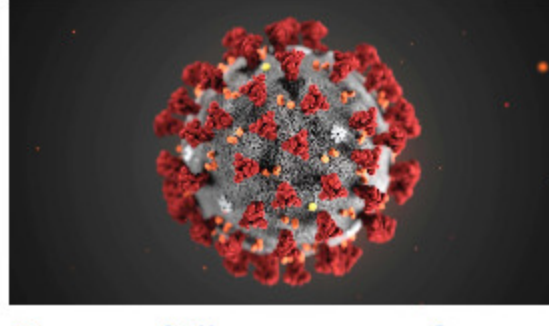


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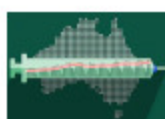
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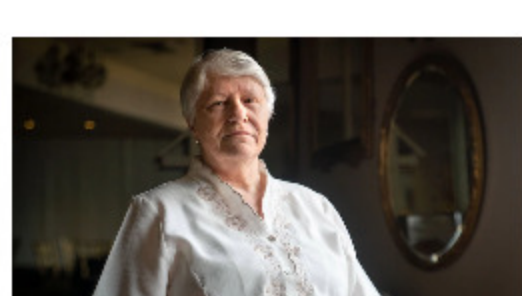
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